

Dick and Jane meet HTML

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Abstract

Learning to read is an essential prerequisite for actively participating in a literate society. The challenge of designing meaningful, effective pedagogies becomes increasingly complex with the proliferation of new forms of technology (from tape recorders and television to computers) that may be enlisted in the process. As contemporary teachers are bombarded with suggestions about how best to initiate their charges into literacy, it is instructive to step back and reflect on what the evolving world of scholarship tells us about past and present thinking on teaching reading.

Gerard Giordano's *Twentieth-Century Reading Education: Understanding Practices of Today in Terms of Patterns of the Past* offers a straightforward review of pedagogical theory and practice in American reading over the past century. Ann Watts Pailliotet and Peter B. Mosenthal's edited collection *Reconceptualizing Literacy in the Media Age* situates reading instruction within the modern discourse of media literacy. Together, the two volumes, though published in 2000, contain enough insightful nuggets to engage readers interested in mapping new directions for teaching this critical skill.

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Review of Ann Watts Pailliotet and Peter B. Mosenthal (Eds.). 2000. *Reconceptualizing Literacy in the Media Age*. (Advances in Reading/Language Research, Vol. 7) Stamford, CT: JAI Press, Inc. xxxii + 451 pp. Gerard Giordano. 2000. *Twentieth-Century Reading Education: Understanding Practices of Today in Terms of Patterns of the Past*. (Advances in Reading/Language Research, Vol. 8) Stamford, CT: JAI Press, Inc. xxii + 399 pp.

Bad lighting is most conducive to eye-strain, and next to this is bad seats, causing improper postures in reading. The arrangement in which there is a plus distance between the desk and seat, leading the pupil to stoop over, with the resulting congestion of the eye, is especially to be avoided. The desk-top must be at a proper angle and the whole arrangement suited to the height of the pupil. . . . It is very important that the light should be steady, and it should come from over the shoulder or the side. It is important in writing that the ink should be black and that the paper be placed at a sufficient distance.

Edmund Burke Huey

The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading (1908, p. 394)

Every era seems to have its own notions about how best to initiate children into the world of reading and writing. In early twentieth-century America, how you sat and where the light came from were deemed critical variables on the path to literacy. (So much for young Abraham Lincoln, sprawled out with his books before an open fire.) A few decades later, American educators were focused on the exploits of that winsome team of kids, Dick and Jane, whose neighborhood adventures were supposed to entice first-graders to want to learn to read. By the 1950s, fully 80% of school children in the US were being taught to read through Scott, Foreman & Company's Dick and Jane series. My own classroom was privileged to have a copy of the nearly 2-foot by 3-foot "Big Book", where Dick, Jane, little sister Sally, and their dog Spot appeared nearly life-sized—or so it felt to us, dwarfing the handful of written words per page.

Fast-forward now half a century, and the teaching of reading (and writing) is nearly unrecognizable. Lighting and seating have been forgotten. No longer confined to the likes of "See Spot run", first-graders are now asked to write and then read stories of their own making, using "invented spelling" for words whose standard orthographic representation eludes them. Often as not, such writing takes place at a computer keyboard, rather than with a traditional stylus on paper. In fact, attention to penmanship is commonly dismissed as irrelevant, much like knowledge of proper napkin-folding or canning your own vegetables.

Over these same five decades, our very understanding of literacy itself has changed. First television and Marshall McLuhan, and then the personal computer revolution compelled us to shift our attention from words as our primary source of communication to images, especially images conveyed through electronic media. At the same time, writing theory saw a chain of transformations. Composition went from being a "product" to a "process", and a participatory process at that, incorporating peer review and even group composition. With the growth of word processing

and then computer networking, texts lost their sense of finality, since changes could always be introduced with minimal effort. In academia, composition programs increasingly incorporated computers into their writing curricula (see, e.g., Hawisher et al., 1995) and professors of rhetoric began arguing that given the technological ease with which written texts were amenable to joint authorship, on-going revision, and outright borrowing, the very concepts of copyright and plagiarism needed rethinking (Lunsford and Ede, 1994; Howard, 1999).

Making sense of new understandings of literacy has become an important enterprise for those involved in educating children. University researchers, teacher trainers, and classroom teachers are increasingly puzzling over how they need to alter classroom pedagogy to accommodate new conceptions of literacy. What should we know of past pedagogies before abandoning longstanding approaches in favor of new ones? What new “theories” do we pass on to in-place teachers? And even, what ethical obligations do university theorists have before dangling new models of literacy pedagogy before well-meaning school systems looking to pride themselves on using the latest teaching methods? This last point is a particularly sore one with me. Today, millions of middle and upper-middle class American teenagers and young adults who were subjected to the “innovative” whole language approach to teaching reading cannot properly sound out new words. Many in the same group are equally challenged when asked to write out a composition by hand, having been reared on “innovative” computer keyboards.

Especially over the past decade, a profusion of books have begun to appear that are designed to help make sense of contemporary literacy issues, especially as they apply to actual classroom education. Contributing to this professional corpus is a series of books put out by JAI Press entitled “Advances in Reading/Language Research”. The present review addresses volumes 7 and 8 in the series, though in reverse order.

Gerard Giordano’s *Twentieth-Century Reading Education* (volume 8) is a straightforward, conscientious review of pedagogical theory and practice in American reading education over the past century. The book is framed in terms of four different instructional approaches and the interplay among them. In his Introduction to the book, Peter Mosenthal (who is also the series editor) notes that multiplicity of theoretical perspectives sets Giordano’s work apart from other existing histories of reading, which tend to be strictly chronological. Moreover, says Mosenthal, comparing alternative instructional approaches is critical because each approach actually represents an educational agenda. Unless we understand these agendas, we cannot accurately assess the motivations for the approaches, much less the reasons for the methods’ successes or failures.

Before Giordano gets to his four-part analysis, he spends roughly half the book setting the historical stage upon which the reading wars of the twentieth century were fought. Chapter 1 (“The Role of Reading in a Besieged Educational System”) examines late nineteenth and early twentieth-century attacks on American education. Chapter 2 (“Early Controversy about Literacy Education”) reviews disputes over reading materials and methods, while Chapter 3 (“Search for Physical Factors”) discusses testing, the physiology and neurology of reading, and the need for good reading “hygiene”—including making sure the light is coming over the shoulder or the

side. Chapter 4 explores “The Golden Era of Remedial Reading” and Chapter 5, “Tension between Political and Pragmatic Philosophies”.

Chapters 6–10 review the four alternative approaches to teaching reading—skills-based, language-based, literature-based, and technology-based, along with a discussion (Chapter 7) on textbooks. The volume concludes with a section on “Teaching Reading to Persons with Disabilities” (Chapter 11), one on “Teaching Reading to Multicultural Groups” (Chapter 12), and a lengthy bibliography.

Moving from Giordano’s single-authored history of a traditionally-defined literacy skill (reading) to Ann Pailliotet and Peter Mosenthal’s edited collection *Reconceptualizing Literacy in the Media Age*, we enter the world of TV and the global village, videos and the Internet. What counts as “media”? It appears that we are talking about visual forms of information that are conveyed by some means of technology. Of course, printed words are also visual representations of information, and books are produced through technological means, but the conventional written or printed word isn’t what media specialists are talking about. What is “media literacy”? One simple definition is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Hobbes, 1997), with the implication that those forms are visual and/or multimodal (most often text plus image) and/or involve electronic or computer-based technology.

The volume’s spiritual take-off point is Marshall McLuhan’s mid-century thinking about the profound impact that visual media (most centrally television) were poised to have on human communication. Given the renewed attention that McLuhan received in the 1990s (e.g., Levinson, 1999), as the Internet made the global village a technological reality, a tie-in to early media theory is justified, however problematic McLuhan’s actual writings may be.

Reconceptualizing Literacy in the Media Age opens with, in essence, three introductions, entitled “Preface” (by Paul Duncan), “Foreword” (by Kathleen Tyner), and “Introduction” (by Ann Pailliotet), respectively. Each essay provides a distinctive perspective on the issues at stake in media literacy, so the serial buildup to the meat of the text itself is not unwelcome. In the process, two themes of the book become clear. First, the volume has a decidedly practical bent, meant to benefit actual in-place teachers. Duncan helpfully cites the words of David Considine, who mused that

It is ironic indeed, that those foisting technology on the nation’s schools fail to perceive the most obvious fact that tools don’t change schools; teachers do. To make those changes they need to be active partners in the transformation process. (p. xi)

Secondly, the book is consciously designed to overcome perceived limitations in earlier (i.e., pre-2000) works on media and visual literacy. Pailliotet explains that the current volume: (1) transcends disciplinary bounds, (2) crosses geographic bounds (by including authors from both the US and Canada), (3) contains visual as well as textual material, (4) is not limited to a single communication medium (e.g., just film or just newspaper) or to a single intellectual goal (e.g., just textual critique or just educational practice), and does not take the “simplistic” perspective of only offering “good news” or “bad news” (pp. xxiv–xxv).

To achieve its goals, *Reconceptualizing Literacy* offers a collection of articles, authored by experts and practitioners: professors of education, psychology, reading and writing, communication, instructional technologies, and media literacy; directors of writing centers and media studies programs; school-based media specialists, consultants, and reading specialists; and experienced classroom reading teachers. The chapters themselves are divided into four broad topics: Identity: Reconceptualizing Literacy Stances and Relations (Section I); Intermediality: Reconceptualizing Literacy Texts and Processes (Section II); Issues: Reconceptualizing Changing Literacy Contexts (Section III); and Reconceptualizing Future Literacy Theories and Directions (Section IV). The essays are followed by an extensive appendix (unexpectedly called an “Afterward”), which lists a rich variety of books, articles, periodicals, media education centers, and Websites that are sure to prove useful to researchers and practitioners alike.

The articles themselves vary in quality. What unites most of them is their down-to-earth viewpoints, their inclusion of ample examples, and their commitment to being of pragmatic use. The only really troublesome part of the book follows from the nature of the discipline it attempts to encompass. While history may not change, the future does, especially in the world of contemporary media technology. A book published in 2000 (probably compiled in 1999) is susceptible to acquiring a rusty feel after a few years, especially in light of recent exponential growth of the Internet and therefore its centrality in any up-to-date study of media literacy.

Conversations with my university’s reference librarian (along with Google searches on my part) suggest that the “Advances in Reading/Language Research” series is no more. Yet these two volumes provide an academically solid endpoint for an endeavor designed to help us better understand the past, present, and at least near future of literacy education.

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